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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 001123

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: INTO THE LION'S DEN: ADDRESSING THE COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

REF: A. MUSCAT 787

[B](#). 04 MUSCAT 1132

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SUMMARY

1. (U) The Ambassador delivered his annual address to the Omani Command and Staff College on July 13, followed by an intense question and answer session. Fielding questions on a broad range of topics, including the war in Iraq, the legal status of Guantanamo detainees, the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, and the perceived maltreatment of Muslims in America, the Ambassador debunked a number of commonly held misperceptions about America and its relationship with the Arab world. The interaction with 81 mid-level officers, including four exchange officers from Jordan and Yemen, was frank and engaging. End Summary.

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Addressing the Graduates

2. (U) The Ambassador took advantage of his annual invitation to address the Ministry of Defense's Command and Staff College July 13 to speak about little-known aspects of U.S. history, culture, and foreign policy. His multi-media presentation was followed by an intense hour-long question and answer period. During his speech, the Ambassador highlighted stories of Arab-Americans reaching their dreams in the U.S. through increased access to education, employment, and higher standards of living. The audience of faculty members and 81 mid-level military students from the Sultan's Armed Forces, Yemen, and Jordan engaged the Ambassador on a variety of topics, some of them controversial. (Note: See ref A on the Ambassador's address to this institution in 2004, while ref B covers a similar question/answer opportunity in May from the Ambassador's address to the Foreign Ministry's Diplomatic Institute. End note.)

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War in Iraq - In Whose Interest?

3. (U) Beginning on a provocative note, a Jordanian army major, citing divergent opinion polls about the war in Iraq, pressed the Ambassador to explain why so few Americans approve of the war while an overwhelming percentage of Israelis favored it. The Ambassador reminded the group that this is not a "U.S. versus the world" issue and that there is an international interest and consensus in helping create a stable and democratic Iraq. The Ambassador cited specific examples of international community's commitment to Iraq's reconstruction as reaffirmed by the Brussels conference in June, where over 80 delegations committed to increased troop support, financial assistance, and debt forgiveness to aid in the multilateral reconstruction efforts.

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Israel/Palestine

4. (U) A major in the Royal Army of Oman pointedly asked the Ambassador about America's continued "blind support" of Israel and its maltreatment of the Palestinian people. While the Ambassador reiterated the Administration's complete support of a free Palestine and Israel living side-by-side, the Ambassador also pointed out that the USG has publicly condemned the loss of civilian life on both sides. The Ambassador referred interested parties to the State Department Human Rights Report on Israel and the Palestinian territories, which is clearly critical of Israeli actions in Palestine.

5. (U) In addressing subsequent questions about Israel, the Ambassador also reminded the group of the significant U.S. contributions to Palestine, including the G8 commitment of \$3 billion in aid pledged for the next three years. In addition, the U.S. continues to work with the Palestinian Authority to facilitate legal and judicial reform, develop a transparent regulatory regime, and work on private-sector job creation to help revive the economy.

6. (U) A Yemeni major invited the Ambassador to share U.S.

views on security in the Gulf. The Ambassador, while acknowledging that security is always a concern, reminded the audience of the long-standing friendly relations the U.S. has with Gulf countries. Although there are concerns about Iran's nuclear program, the U.S. is committing enormous resources, through trade agreements and aid, to address perceived inequities in the region.

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Guantanamo  
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17. (U) A few officers inquired about the legal status of detainees in Guantanamo. While briefing the group on the legal background of the U.S. administration of Guantanamo, the Ambassador highlighted the transparency of the detention center and the unprecedented access to Guantanamo by 1,000 journalists, 180 congressional representatives, as well as visits by the representatives of countries who have nationals there. 70 cases have been reviewed of late and 29 of those detainees will be returning to their countries. However, the Administration's view of al-Qaida and Taliban detainees is that they are enemy combatants who may be held under the law of war.

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Muslims in America  
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18. (U) Citing reports from al-Jazeera, one major asked why there is so much hatred of Arabs in America. Seizing upon Oman's highly successful participation in the annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival, the Ambassador cited numerous examples of effortless and enjoyable experiences of Arabs traveling to America without incident -- including the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, the Southern Methodist University Rule of Law Forum, and the International Visitor Leadership Program. Dispelling some common misconceptions about maltreatment of Muslims in America, the Ambassador encouraged more Omanis to travel to the U.S., be it for business, pleasure, or study, to experience for themselves the open-minded and welcoming America that shares so much in common with tolerant, moderate Oman.

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Comment  
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19. (U) This annual address offered an excellent opportunity to engage Omanis and other Arabs on current events and to debunk all-too-common myths of our "blind support" of Israel and hostility toward Muslims in America. The students appeared to appreciate the frank discussion and the Ambassador's patient engagement on the subject matter. However, the strident, provocative, and sometimes misinformed questions posed by some of these future Arab military leaders show that much work remains to be done.  
BALTIMORE